Michael Perfect. *Contemporary Fictions of Multiculturalism: Diversity and the Millennial London Novel*. New York: Palgrave, 2014. Pp. xi, 221. £55.00.

Michael Perfect's *Contemporary Fictions of Multiculturalism* begins with an engaging analysis of the opening ceremony of the 2012 London Olympics. Perfect's careful reading of the event showcases many of the strengths of his study of the millennial London novel. As the ceremony's huge cast of players traversed the grounds at the newly built Olympic Stadium, Danny Boyle's spectacle recalled the Isles' pastoral history in a flurry of round dances and grandstanding oratory, only to strip the reveries away with sudden and emphatic force. Perfect writes, "as smokestacks [rose] dramatically from the ground, . . . Boyle's ceremony seems to suggest, London must have seemed like the capital of hell. How, it wondered, did the city go from being the capital of hell, to the capital of a modern, multicultural nation?" (2). Keeping this particular question in mind, Perfect's introduction delivers an informed and nuanced review of the social and literary legacies of the Windrush Generation. Perfect's brisk transition from the 2012 London Olympics to the first days of large-scale immigration into the United Kingdom is mediated by the historical coincidence that London last hosted the games in 1948, the year the *Empire Windrush* first docked in Tilbury, an event that marked the beginning of Britain's postwar immigration boom.

The book's opening vignette is aptly chosen. Like Boyle's ceremony, Perfect's monograph offers a critical yet broadly affirmative reading of the contemporary moment. We can be fairly sure that a considerable distance separates the "capital of hell" from the capital of this "modern, multicultural nation" (2). Or can we? In Perfect's reading of the millennial London novel there is always a little room for doubt. Indeed, his argument rarely fixes on a hard and fast political position, preferring, instead, to showcase the diversity of perspectives on millennial London that British writers have offered. *Contemporary Fictions of Multiculturalism* is fundamentally concerned with the characteristic particularities of each writer's vision. According to Perfect, schematic readings of writers such as Salman Rushdie, Zadie Smith, Andrea Levy, and Hanif Kureishi have tended to mistakenly conflate their distinctive and conflicting accounts of contemporary London. This tendency is, in part, a product of ascribing undue significance to "authorial ethnicity" (200). This widely practiced mode of appraisal ostensibly leads readers to interpret authors as representatives of minority experience, judging their works' "authenticity" accordingly (201). Perfect's account "attempts to resist" this

approach (200). He also argues that the trope of the immigrant as "powerless victim" has bedevilled contemporary London's literary field (200). Works such as Brian Chikwava's *Harare North* have largely failed to find an audience because readers remain stubbornly attached to postcolonial clichés and averse to narratives that complicate or critique the established tropes.

In one of the book's strongest chapters, Perfect returns to Smith's millennial blockbuster, *White Teeth*, arguing that the novel has been misleadingly compared to Rushdie's superficially similar "big, multigenerational" metropolitan novels (77). In contrast to the complex indeterminacies and contingencies explored in Rushdie's fiction, *White Teeth* is "a very calculated attempt to celebrate a very particular brand of multiculturalism; one that it seeks to familiarise" (79). This particular brand of multiculturalism turns out to be "one in which, specifically, a confluence of white Britishness . . . with Britain's non-white, postcolonial immigrant communities . . . affords a vision of a new millennium in which tensions between those groups might begin to be consigned to the past" (95). It is, indeed, hard to imagine Rushdie engaging in such an affirmative form of political forecasting.

As Perfect draws to his conclusion, he notes that the optimistic multiculturalism that had sustained *White Teeth*'s outlook has grown a little thinner on the ground in recent decades. Doubtful that such novels belong entirely to the past, however, Perfect still finds it "encouraging that, in recent years, a number of novelists have sought to question the degree to which London's ethnic and cultural diversity can increasingly be seen as a function of global capitalism, rather than as being symptomatic of a progressive social or political commitment to values such as equality and inclusiveness" (200). This observation deserves greater elaboration. In Raymond Williams' terms, Perfect seems to be on the cusp of assigning multicultural optimism a residual status, sensing, perhaps, that it is being displaced by a newly crystallizing concern with class and transnational finance capital. But here, as elsewhere, Perfect eschews large conceptual claims. As his argument reaches its close, he seconds Jerry White's dictum that "London is the prophet's graveyard" before claiming that "[m]uch the same can perhaps be said of the city's literature" (201).

Yet in the age of anthropogenic climate change, we seem to be confronted by dire predictions at every turn. In this respect, it is rather surprising that *Contemporary Fictions of Multiculturalism* concludes by figuring the British metropolis as an everlasting city, one whose "extraordinary multiculturalism" would "certainly" continue to prove a source of inspiration for London's writers in whatever future awaited it (200). As climate change emerges as one of the signal concerns of our era and as the question of "sustainability" becomes central to the language of global governance, it seems imperative that surveys

of our major metropolises' literature better explore how the recognition of anthropogenic climate change has shaped contemporary writing. As images of huge displaced populations become routine features of our newsfeeds, and as European nations unashamedly vet migrants on the basis of their ethnicity, it can hardly be argued that such concerns are peripheral to the issue of multiculturalism.

In the same month as the end of the 2012 London Games, Smith's highly anticipated new novel *NW* hit the nation's bookshelves. In a novel that surely supplied in-flight reading for many visitors retuning home from the Games, Smith returns to the neighbourhood in which she had set her debut, finding it riven with the kinds of inequities and disparities that *White Teeth* had hoped to relegate to the past. Perfect notes this return but devotes only a handful of pages to it, suggesting that *NW* reminds "us of the very real inequalities that persist in contemporary, multicultural London" (101). But do they simply "persist"? Or have they in fact grown worse? The darker and more rueful vision of Smith's mature work implies the latter. Indeed, things seem to be declining along a number of vectors: "Everyone knows it shouldn't be this hot. Shrivelled blossom and bitter little apples. Birds singing the wrong tunes in the wrong trees too early in the year" (Smith 3). There are, in short, signs and portents. As White and Perfect observe, London has previously bested a host of attempts to divine its future. Yet as the data on climate change continues to roll in, it seems increasingly unlikely that it can continue to do so. As Smith's *NW* suggests, in the absence of a radical political sea change, London's future seems set to prove increasingly hot, dark, and divisive.

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Works Cited

Smith, Zadie. *NW.* New York: Penguin, 2012. Print.